

Easter Day. April 4, 2021. Saint Stephen's, Athens, GA

Saint John 20, verse 10 - *Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Recently two of our members reminded me that our mutual friend and former parishioner and Athenian, Natalie Wellman, when I greeted her traditionally on Easter Day years ago by saying, 'Christ is risen!', replied: 'You betcha!'

Well, you betcha! And I do bet you, and I'll put every dime down on the bet. Christ is risen! That, in a sense, is all we need to say on Easter. But you are expecting a sermon, so allow me note how extremely strange my text is today: *Then the disciples went away again unto their own home.*

The disciples have gone to see for themselves the empty tomb that Mary Magdalene has reported. They too find the tomb empty, with the linen shroud and face cloth left behind. The beloved disciple, we are told, 'saw, and believed', but his belief is imperfect and inexact: 'For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.' They don't yet know the meaning of the scripture because according to Saint John the meaning of Scripture is only unfolded gradually after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostolic Church. So, in this state, suspended between knowledge and ignorance, between faith in the Resurrection and doubt as to what has happened, what do Peter and John do? they 'went away again unto their own home.'

I don't know about you, but to me that's an anticlimax. The disciples stand in the garden on the dawn of Easter day, the most important moment in world history, the heart and center and pivot of human destiny, and they head home for breakfast.

If we read the gospels with care, surely the obtuseness of our Lord's contemporaries is striking. There Christ was, God on earth, healing the sick, raising the dead, stilling storms, multiplying loaves and fishes. We are told that people right and left were amazed by him and had faith in him. Yet at the moment of his arrest, 'they all forsook him, and fled.' (S. Mark 14.50) Consider the fickleness of the crowd last Sunday, when at the Palm liturgy we heard the crowd singing hosannas to the Son of David, then a few days later the same crowd cries, 'Crucify him, crucify him!' And again, during Holy Week we hear Saint Peter say, 'Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death' (Luke 22.33) and, again, 'Although all shall be offended, yet will not I.' (Mark 14.29) But a few moments later, this same Peter

says, 'I know him not.' (Luke 22.57) Surely if people really believed, they would not be so fickle and weak and inconsistent. Yet one of the clearest points of the gospels, and of the whole Bible for that matter, is that we are a stiff-necked people. We are stubborn, recalcitrant, hard-hearted, slow to understand, slow to grasp the meaning of what we see and experience, quick to abandon what we do understand.

And my text today is an illustration of this slowness. Christ is risen, the tomb is empty, hell is broken, Satan is cast down, 'death is vanquished, / man is free', grace pours forth from the transfigured wounds of the Prince of Life immortal, a new day is dawning upon which the sun will never set: and the disciples go home. How typical of Saint Peter, the New Testament bumbler. How typical of all the disciples, a weak and fallible group. It's as if on Christmas the shepherds listened to the angels and then wandered off to have some lamb stew.

Of course, this apparent ability to miss the point is not just typical of Peter and John and the other disciples. The disciples very much stand for us all. We too are quite capable of missing the point and wandering off home. Years ago Christmas fell on a Saturday, and as I came to church early on Sunday the 26th I saw the parking lot of a local store filled at 7:45 a.m. with shoppers ready for the so-called after Christmas sale. I was stunned. What a stupid confusion of priorities. But that's the way we are. And it's the way we are most of the time in our silly world.

So today, when *you* head back home, as of course we inevitably and properly must do, do not do so in a state of apostolic blindness. The apostles went to the tomb at dawn, when the light of the eternal day was just beginning. They do not yet understand, but they go to the tomb impelled by love. Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, went to the empty tomb first because she had the most love. Likewise later in this same chapter she is the first to meet the risen Lord in the flesh. The beloved disciple, Saint John, reaches the tomb of Jesus before Saint Peter because he loved more than Peter. While Peter denied our Lord three times in the darkness of night at the palace of Caiaphas, John stood in the light of noon, at the cross his station keeping, with our Lord's Blessed Mother and the little band of faithful women. Love is loyal and love leads the way.

But love for the Crucified is not enough. If Christ had never risen, Mary Magdalene and John still would have loved; loved and mourned in the night. The good news of Easter day is that the story is not a tragedy. It does not end with a death. The understanding of Christ's disciples now must be enlightened by the dawning realization that the tomb is empty *because the Lord is risen*. The empty tomb of Easter morning will quickly give way to the Resurrection appearances of Easter

week and to the descent of the Holy Spirit to enlighten the understanding of the disciples. They have already been told what they need to know: our Lord has already foretold his death and rising many times. Now they will see and then more deeply comprehend.

So too with us. We have all been told what Easter means. Now that meaning should penetrate our hard hearts with its light and joy. Easter should shape our lives, our way living. God holds before us immortal life in his risen Son, and that should affect how we live the few days we have left in this present, mortal life. The epistles for today connect the Easter message with the ideas of moral renovation and conversion of daily life: 'Set your affection on things above, not on things on earth.' (Col. 3) And again, '[L]et us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.' (I Cor. 5)

Christ is risen, trampling down death by death. Now let us rise with him into newness of living. Let us put aside malice and wickedness and pride and dishonesty and anger and weakness, and let us bend our stiff necks and worship our risen Lord in sincerity and love and truth.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.